WHO Director-General's remarks at the Member States Working Group on Strengthening WHO Preparedness - 3 November 2021

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Dear colleagues and friends,

Let me begin by thanking all of you for your commitment and hard work.

I know that many of you have risen very early in the morning, or worked very late into the evening.

It has been a truly round the globe, round the clock effort.

My thanks also to all the members of the Bureau, especially the co-chairs Grata and Colin, and the vice chairs Malebogo, François, Ala and Lyn.

And we also appreciate the contribution of all the NGOs, the other UN agencies, the invited experts and the advisory panels who have supported this working group in so many ways.

COVID-19 has now killed 5 million people. And they're just the reported deaths.

An unknown number live with long-COVID, a disease we don't understand.

Health systems have been overwhelmed. Millions have missed out on essential life-saving health services. Progress against HIV, tuberculosis, malaria and many other diseases has stalled or gone backwards.

Millions of children have missed out on routine vaccinations, and months of education.

Millions of people have lost their jobs, or been plunged into poverty.

The global economy is still clawing its way out of recession.

Political divisions have deepened, nationally and globally.

Inequalities have widened.

Science has been undermined. Misinformation has abounded.

And it will all happen again unless you, the nations of the world, can come together to say with one voice: never again.

At its heart, the pandemic is a crisis of solidarity that has been exposed and exacerbated by fundamental weaknesses in the global health architecture:

Complex and fragmented governance;

Inadequate financing;

And insufficient systems and tools.

Voluntary mechanisms have not solved these challenges; in fact, they have made them worse.

The only way we can solve them is with a binding treaty or agreement between nations; a pact forged from the recognition that we have no future but a common future.

Such a treaty or agreement could set out high-level, agreed principles to strengthen solidarity, equity, One Health and health for all.

And it should be rooted in Article 19 of the WHO Constitution and its vision for "the highest attainable standard of health" for all people, as a fundamental human right.

That was the vision of Member States when they founded WHO in 1948. We need that same vision now.

The Special Session of the World Health Assembly is therefore a unique opportunity;

An opportunity for a generational agreement that transcends media cycles and election cycles.

The stakes are high, but so are the rewards:

Enhanced national and international capacities for implementing the IHR;

More predictable, transparent and flexible financing for preparedness and response;

Better data management, analytics and real-time communication;

Better mechanisms for managing essential health commodities;

A coordinated, skilled and rapidly deployable global health emergency workforce;

A coordinated approach to discover, develop and deliver effective tools and technologies;

A sustainable mechanism for sharing pathogens and the tools that are developed from them;

A coordinated response to infodemics;

And international collaboration to accelerate innovation.

Underpinning it all, we need a commitment to equity and inclusiveness.

I'm encouraged that there is now an emerging consensus on the need for such an instrument, although I recognize that there are still areas of difference.

Whatever we call it – treaty, agreement or instrument – it must be binding.

We still have a long road to travel together. Reaching our destination will take negotiation, compromise, and time.

We will not achieve everything at the Special Session, but it should serve as a launching pad for a treaty, by establishing a leadership team to direct the rapid development of a zero draft for negotiations, which would begin immediately after next year's World Health Assembly.

The task is urgent, but it also requires patience.

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Dear colleagues and friends,

COVID-19 will not be the last pandemic. We cannot predict when the next one will be, or which virus will cause it.

But we can take the steps now, learning the lessons this pandemic has taught us, to ensure that when it arrives, we are all more ready than we were this time.

I know it isn't easy; but nothing worthwhile in life is ever easy; and nothing easy is ever worthwhile.

I thank you.

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